

CHAPTER 4: PARKS & RECREATION

Introduction

Public parks, trails and recreation offer countless values to Flathead County residents and visitors. Public parks, trails and open space provide the opportunity to be physically active and fit. Having close to home access to quality places to recreate is one of the most important factors in determining whether people are active and will continue to stay that way. Policy 18.5 originally called for the creation – and now utilization - of a Parks and Recreation Master Plan to guide facilities planning in Flathead County. This policy was met in 2009 when Flathead County formally adopted a Parks and Recreation Plan [Resolution No. 2015L} as an element of the Growth Policy. The Master Plan considers a number of factors related to parks and recreation master planning throughout Flathead County, including population growth, facilities maintenance and the future needs and desires of the community. The Master Plan is referenced heavily throughout this chapter, as it provides more detailed analysis and comprehensive evaluation as an extension of the Growth Policy document.

Goal

- G.18 To accelerate the development process for park, trail, and open space infrastructure to meet the challenges of community growth and development.

Policies

- P.18.1 Acquire park and leisure facility sites now to serve the future needs of the county, particularly water-based parks which provide public access to lakes, rivers and streams.
- P.18.2 With the exception of water based parks, utilize subdivision park requirements to create and/or fund dedicated park sites of an optimal size no less than five acres, to accommodate operation and maintenance costs.
- P.18.3 Ensure existing parks and recreational facilities are operated and maintained in a quality condition for use by the general public.
- P.18.4 Develop strategies to fund, operate, and maintain new parks and recreational facilities.
- P.18.5 Utilize the comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan to guide the expansion of the park system to meet the needs and expectations of the growing public. Update the Parks and Recreation Master Plan at a minimum of every five years from the date of adoption, to ensure the plan is current.

- P.18.6 Preserve and increase recreational access to public lands and waterways by procuring necessary land, easements, or rights of way.
- P.18.7 Create a committee to determine and prioritize areas for bike path easement acquisition and construction, prioritize use of funds, guide grant applications, identify roads that should have bicycle lanes, determine maintenance funding mechanisms, and set county-wide bicycle path/lane construction standards.

Goal

- G.19 To create partnerships with common interest groups and the people within our community.

Policies

- P.19.1 Encourage parks, planning, maintenance and development coordination with other local jurisdictions as well as state and federal agencies.
- P.19.2 Participate with developing partnerships, community civic groups and organizations, private sector building and development industry, and others interested in parks and recreation activities.
- P.19.3 Support “pocket parks” which are owned and maintained by home owner groups and Associations.
- P.19.4 Recognize riparian buffers for their recreational value and their ability to protect the quality of water along major streams and rivers in the County in order to enhance recreational opportunities, protect the quality of water (reduce erosion; surface runoff containing pesticides, fertilizers, etc.; stream bank depredation/defoliation; etc.) and their ability to protect the natural aesthetics of waterways.
- P.19.5 Develop County Parks in conjunction with public or private schools whenever possible.
- P.19.6 Develop standards, procedures, and requirements for the preparation, review, and adoption of neighborhood and subdivision park plans.

Goal

- G.20 Maintain and/or increase the current level of service for park facilities and recreation services in Flathead County relative to population growth and public demands and expectations.

Policies

- P.20.1 Provide for and acquire new lands and indoor/outdoor recreation and park facilities as outlined in the comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan to keep pace with expanding population and demand.
- P.20.2 Maintain the current level of recreation services by providing innovative programs geared towards a diverse demographic of county residents (children, adults, seniors, etc.).

PART 1: Community Benefits of Parks and Recreation (see Goals 18 and 19)

The economic benefits of parks and recreation areas are numerous. One of the more significant benefits is the increase in value of private lands adjacent to or near protected public parks, trails or open space. Close proximity of parks to residential areas leads to increased land values and safer walks for children and adults to the park and back. Often, quality parks and recreation areas are an important consideration of businesses looking at expansion or relocation. Parks and recreation areas improve the quality of the living environment and make communities more desirable for businesses and homeowners.

Parks, trails and open spaces provide vital green space in an ever-changing landscape. They provide vegetative buffers and recreational areas and can be used to reduce the impacts of development. These areas are also instrumental in providing access to rivers, lakes and adjoining public lands. Just as importantly parks, trails and open space can help to maintain view sheds, provide groundwater recharge areas, floodplain protection, natural sound barriers, weed buffers, and filter pollutants from the air. Parks help to keep the living environment healthy.

Parks, trails and open spaces facilitate social interactions between individuals, families, civic groups and others. These areas are critical to maintaining community cohesion and pride. Parks provide meeting places where the community can develop social ties and bonds. Leisure activity in parks can reduce stress and enhance a sense of wellness. People go to parks, use trails or experience open space to reinvigorate themselves and to decrease anxieties of daily life.

Community recreation services and programs encourage organized structure and enjoyable activities for people of all ages. The Department of Parks and Recreation offers organized recreation programs for both youth and adults. Programs currently offered for youth include outdoor flag football, volleyball and t-ball at various locations throughout the county. Adult programs include basketball, flag football and softball. The Conrad Sports Complex currently services over 100 softball teams. There are also a large number of nonprofit sports organizations throughout the county that utilize these facilities to offer a wide variety of activities for children and adults.

PART 2: Flathead County Parks

Existing Characteristics

The growing popularity and demand for parks and recreational opportunities are in proportion to the dynamic growth and development Flathead County has experienced over the years. During the growth policy public meetings held throughout Flathead County in November and December of 2005 and January of 2006, numerous residents cited increased and improved parks and recreation services as desirable goals for the future of the county. (See Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary.) A growing public desires greater opportunities for passive and organized recreation programming. Greater access to water-based recreation is also a growing priority. The Department of Parks and Recreation is currently responsible for the development, operation and maintenance of a wide range and variety of parks and recreation facilities. Although the existing park and recreation system offers recreational opportunities for individuals, families and group users, it should be dynamic to meet changing public needs and desires.

The department currently maintains 70 park and recreation facilities and one cemetery totaling approximately 515 acres. The facilities can be categorized by function. Of the 70 park sites, 32 sites are developed parks totaling 383 acres, 14 sites are water based parks, 14 sites are neighborhood parks, 2 are sports parks, 2 are classified special use parks and 3 are linear parks.¹ Map 4.1 shows the location of existing park and leisure facilities. The Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan provides a detailed overview of all the County parks identified, inventorying the size, location, type, facilities and availability of water access in Appendix A of the Master Plan document. Please reference this document for further details and analysis regarding existing parks and recreation characteristics in Flathead County.

Administration of Parks and Recreation

The Flathead County Parks Board oversees park and recreations services for the County. The board is comprised of five members appointed by the Flathead County Board of Commissioners to serve three year terms. The Board meets monthly and has responsibility for administration of the Parks and Recreation Department.

In July 1997, the County Commission merged the Parks and Recreation Department with the Weed Department. The two boards were merged and the Parks & Recreation Director currently acts as the noxious Weed Coordinator as well as the Facilities Manager in charge of building and grounds maintenance for the County.

The Parks Board advises staff and the County Commission on community needs and provides input related to parks and recreation issues. The Board is also responsible for long-range park planning. Park Boards are authorized under Section 7-16-2301 of the Montana Code Annotated (MCA). Under these provisions, the Park Board has authority to employ the department director and make rules for the use of parks and impose penalties for the violation of rules. The Board employs staff to program recreation as

¹ Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Resolution No. 2015L; pg. 31, Table 6

well as operate and maintain facilities. The Parks Board can also acquire land needed for parks and recreation facilities. These sites may be in incorporated cities as well as in unincorporated areas of Flathead County.

In 2008, the Parks Board created an advisory committee to develop a Trails Plan under guidance from the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program of the National Park Service, and in compliance with associated goals and policies of the Flathead County Growth Policy. The committee formed was known as the PATHS Committee, standing for “people, athletics, travel, health and safety”. The Committee met for nearly 18 months in order to develop a comprehensive trails plan for the County, gathering community input, reviewing past efforts, developing goals and policies, analyzing trail patterns, network strategies and implementation and administration efforts. The Flathead County Trails Plan was formally adopted October 12, 2010 by Resolution No. 2015O as an element of the Growth Policy. Content of the Plan will be referenced later on in Chapter 6 of this document, regarding transportation in Flathead County.

PART 3: State and Federal Recreation Areas (see Goal 1 in Chapter 2: Land Uses)

Within Flathead County there are numerous parks and recreation areas under federal and state management. These facilities offer a wide diversity of all season outdoor recreational amenities for county residents. Major recreational facilities and administering agencies are listed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1
Federal & State Recreation Areas

Facility	Area	Management Agency
Glacier Nat'l Park	635,214	US National Park Service
Flathead National Forest	1,875,545	US Forest Service
Kootenai, Lewis and Clark and Lolo National Forests	115,390 (total acreage)	US Forest Service
Lost Trails National Wildlife Refuge	7,885	US Fish & Wildlife
Swan River National Wildlife Refuge	1,568	US Fish & Wildlife
Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area	5,189	US Fish & Wildlife
Wayfarers State Park	67	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Whitefish Lake State Park	11	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Flathead River FAS	44 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Pressentine FAS	11 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks

Horseshoe Lake FAS	23 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Kokanee Bend FAS	185 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Lone Pine State Park	229 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Old Steel Bridge FAS	128 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Sportsman's Bridge FAS	6 acres	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks

Source: Montana Natural Resource Information System

Stillwater State Forest and other scattered State Trust lands managed by MT Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) for timber production in Flathead County have also historically been used for hunting, fishing and other individual outdoors-oriented general recreational use. DNRC is responding to manage steadily increasing interest in commercial recreational use and more organized and developed recreational uses, especially in the urban interface lands such as those near Whitefish (e.g., groomed snowmobile and ski trails, commercial horseback riding, backcountry skiing access, dog mushing, improved hiking/biking trail system and various associated guiding services).

The primary distinction between federal and state recreation areas and county recreation areas is programming. Parks under county administration typically offer active organized sport activities (e.g. softball, volleyball, soccer and football, etc.), while federal and state lands promote unique outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, fishing and hunting. The importance of federal and state lands for recreation is tied to the custom and culture of Montana residents and visitors for outdoor activities. Flathead County seeks to provide recreational opportunities that are an alternative to activities found on federal and state lands as well as safeguard public access to public lands and water bodies.

PART 4: Level of Service (see Goal 20)

Level of service is one tool used to baseline existing parks and recreational infrastructure relative to population. Flathead County's population between 2006 and 2008 was estimated slightly less than 87,000. The population of the unincorporated area of the county was estimated at 53,483 for this same time period. Based on the unincorporated population, the county offers approximately 7.2 acres of total recreational area per 1,000 residents. Existing park space available to the residents of Flathead County is further discussed in *Chapter 5: Level of Service* of the Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan.

Level of service calculations are used to monitor performance in implementing park and recreation service delivery and infrastructure goals. Level of service goals are normally associated with comprehensive parks master plans; The Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan adopted in 2009 analyzes the current level of service as well as anticipated needs to serve future populations and increasing level of service demands.

This information and a detailed analysis of current and future LOS projections can be found in Chapter 5 of the plan.

Comments gathered from County residents during the 2006 public survey process for the Growth Policy² indicated a need to provide organized sports and other recreational activities and services. Softball and youth soccer are popular and highly visible activities, with more than 100 teams competing annually for space at the Conrad Sports Complex. Organized recreation for youth is also in demand. More specialized types of recreation, such as skateboard parks and swimming, are growing in popularity. The County provides organized recreational programs to more than 10,000 residents each year. Presently, the county does not have a recreation center for basketball or other indoor recreation activities. These needs are comprehensively addressed in Chapter 6 of the Master Plan regarding organized sports.

² Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan, Res. No. 2015L; Appendix E – Survey Summary

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